

I am writing to urge you to please consider carefully the implications of the warrant article coming before town meeting that would ask the Planning Board to develop a bylaw mandating that newly constructed town buildings, commercial and office buildings, and multiple residence structures meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standards. While good intentioned, this proposal has serious consequences to both the environment and the Massachusetts forest economy.

As you well know, I strongly support environmentally friendly and energy-efficient building practices, and I want our community to promote this. The intent of suggesting that LEED building standards be mandated in Amherst is good, but unfortunately the best intentions do not guarantee good results.

Among other provisions, LEED standards award preference to wood products certified as coming from sustainably managed forests. But (due in my opinion to the lobbying efforts of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)), LEED standards only uses one yardstick, developed by FSC, to decide if a forest is sustainable or not.

As you may know the FSC standard is just one of several available for certifying sustainable forestry. But it hasn't attracted much interest from small family forest owners (who own most of Massachusetts' forests) because of FSC's great expense and complexity. Fortunately for family forest owners there are other systems available for certifying sustainable forestry. Like FSC they ensure forests provide green space and wildlife habitats, protect clean air and water, and produce wood to support fragile rural economies. The largest such program is the American Tree Farm System, of which Cowls has been a member and been certified sustainable for over 50 years – since its inception. The Tree Farm standards are credible and effective. They were developed with partners like the Environmental Defense Fund.

If the town of Amherst requires LEED building standards, then local businesses like Cowls Sawmill and Wagner Wood and family forest owners and sawmillers in neighboring towns will suffer. Wood grown in other states would be preferable to wood grown in MA. Amherst family forest owners' income would be threatened because markets for their logs would shrink. Without strong markets, family forests could be sold which would facilitate sprawl and a loss of open space for recreation.

It is hard enough to make a living today in agriculture. Markets are limited. Putting more barriers up to our materials use could be detrimental.

I agree with the goal of promoting green building. But this goal must be reached while promoting locally produced materials and encouraging the conservation of Massachusetts' family forests.

I urge you to find another way to encourage green building. One that supports our regional and agrarian economy and encourages buying local agricultural products.

Thanks very much for considering this point of view. I'd really appreciate it if someone would post this note on the town meeting list serve if that's possible, so those voting have a chance to consider these points. Thanks again.

Cinda

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